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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the goals, processes, resources, and effectiveness of Ethiopia's efforts to teach its people to read. Of the estimated 27 million people living in Ethiopia, only ten percent are literate. In recognition of this, and with the hypothesis that literacy skills are prerequisites for building a just and egalitarian society, governmental, private, religious, and commercial organizations are sponsoring literacy-skill learning within and without the formal primary schools. (UNESCO is one such organization and has instituted two programs for literacy skill learning.) Such efforts are hampered by a number of important political and cultural factors, including lack of incentive to become, and to remain, literate; the complexity of the language of instruction (Amharic); the diversity of other languages used by the population; the lack of appropriate instructional personnel, materials, equipment, and facilities; and the unsupportive social and economic environment. The report suggests that, in order to achieve the goal of creating a literate society within this century, ways and means must be found to overcome literacy-inhibiting factors by making use of available, evidently successful approaches. (Author/RL)

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APPRAISAL OF ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS IN ETHIOPIA

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Appraisal of Adult Literacy Programs in Ethiopia

For almost three decades now the world has been trying to come to grips with the problem of illiteracy. Despite determined efforts--at national, regional, and international levels--to reduce and eventually to eliminate illiteracy from the face of the globe, in absolute terms the number of illiterates in many of the Third World countries is increasing. Nagging questions then arise: Is illiteracy something that can be eradicated? What is the minimum amount one has to have in order to be classified as literate? What are the concomitants that tend to facilitate the acquisition, retention and application of adult literacy skills? Is it possible for members of a society to participate fully without the skills of literacy? Are literacy efforts justified relative to resources investments?

The usual assumptions extended in favor of the development of programs for teaching adult literacy skills include the following: (1) for effective social and personal development, citizens must possess skills in the basic tools of reading, that is, in the recognition of written symbols and in comprehending, interpreting, and applying them to the control of their environment; (2) the process of acquiring literacy skills itself leads the individual to become more perceptive and sensitive to the processes of social, political and economic change and to new techniques and ideas that are the prerequisites of development; (3) literacy skills facilitate national integration and unity; and (4) literacy skills foster fuller employment opportunity thus helping people to participate in better living.

Drawing upon first hand observation and what limited literature is available, this paper examines the experiences of Ethiopia, in terms specifically of spreading adult literacy, and tries to indicate whether

the general assumptions upon which literacy efforts have been predicated are indeed born out by actual outcomes.

Ethiopia has a population of approximately 28 million people. The estimated literacy rate among the adult population is 10 percent. The birth rate is 2.5 percent. If development is predicated upon the possession of skills of literacy by the majority of the people, then Ethiopia faces formidable problems.

Throughout Ethiopia's long history, the responsibility for creating literates in the national language was assumed primarily by the Ethiopians' Orthodox Church. Beginning perhaps as early as the 6th century, reading was taught to boys (and some girls) whose parents were adherents of that church. In fact the first phase of church education, Yenibab Bet, literally means House of Reading. These kinds of centers were located in churches, monasteries and in the compounds of wealthy feudal landlords, and attended by children and adults alike who came to learn reading under the leadership of a priest or debtra (deacon), or a monk. The language of learning was Ge'ez, the ancient liturgical language. The learning materials were written in that language and were limited to the Bible and other religious works. The emphasis was entirely on reading: writing traditionally was looked down upon because of its association with the manifestation of evil and magic. Therefore, it is still hardly ever taught at the lower levels.

Instruction in the schools of reading proceeds through the following stages: First the alphabet is mastered; learners are taught to recognize all of the 231 characters of the alphabet and the sound that each letter represents. At the second stage the student learns the Epistle of St. John, at first by pronouncing in a singing voice each letter of every word, then by putting the letters together to pronounce each word. He

then learns to pronounce phrases and finally he reads sentences. The student continues to read other religious texts. When he finally reads and commits to memory the Psalms of David, he is considered to have satisfied the requirements of the House of Reading. There is great rejoicing and festivity among family and teachers alike and the event inspires admiration in the community. However the student has not yet learned to understand what he read. The act of reading was considered efficacious in itself, for one learns to read the scriptures in order to be able to communicate with one's God. It is considered unnecessary to understand what is read at this stage, the stage, precisely, at which most of the students withdraw. That is, the act of reading does not require comprehension.

The statistical data regarding the exact number of these students and schools is still hard to come by. It was estimated that by the late 1960's there were about 15,000 churches with some 200,000 teaching priests, most of them located in the highlands. Each church has at least one teacher conducting a House of Reading and each House has at least 20 students, yielding a total enrollment of roughly 300,000.

In recent years some of the church schools have been directing their efforts at teaching literacy skills in Amharic, and the emphasis is now shifting toward preparing students for entry to nearby secular government schools or to other "modern" types of church schools that follow Ministry of Education approved curricula. Efforts are also being directed toward work-oriented adult literacy.

Obviously, the outreach of the church has been very circumscribed. Aside from its use of archaic methodologies, it has catered overwhelmingly to the male offsprings of Christians. Thus female children, as well as non-Christians, were excluded until the 19th century when foreign

missionaries began to arrive in force and established schools that did not exclude people on the basis of sex and religion.

What is of special relevance to this paper is that secular, state operated schooling of any kind is entirely a phenomenon of the present century. The last three in the succession of rulers seem to have understood the value of a literate society and have passed some forward looking, but unrealistic laws which required universal literacy among young and old generations alike within a short period of time. These efforts, however, have never been fully realized and their actualization continues to be of major concern even now.

If the goals of universal literacy are still considered valid, the implementation of goals has gone through considerable redirection in recent years. The teaching of literacy skills through the traditional, formal schools was found to be slow, expensive, and with very limited results except for those few who went on to the next stage. Therefore though it was left to the formal schools to continue to carry out their traditional functions, namely, preparing people for the next higher level or for employment, it was felt that different means must be found to create literacy skills among people who were already working but had been left out for one reason or another by the formal schools.

In the late 1940's adult literacy programs were reactivated by concerned civil servants in cooperation with secondary school students and their teachers. In 1958 this literacy effort was formalized when the government entered into agreement with UNESCO to establish a center to train educators of "fundamental skills." The program envisioned the training of entire families of prospective educators. The husbands were taught courses in teaching methodology, agriculture, community development,

health and the like; the wives studied home economics; the children were provided elementary education. Over a period of four years some 200 such fundamental educators were trained. What happened, however, was that as they went out into the field to work, these new teachers were received coolly by the villagers who believed they were to be relegated to second class education. Eventually in 1962 the entire program had to be discontinued.

Roughly coincidental with the termination of this effort, a National Literacy Campaign Organization (NCLO) was established as a private, non-profit, voluntary organization to continue the literacy programs. The NCLO's efforts were based on the voluntary labor of students and their teachers during the summer and other school vacation periods. During its first year of operation in 1963 the organization purportedly enrolled 14,800 students in literacy classes. By the summer of 1965 that number had grown impressively to approximately 20,000.

With the passing of time, the organization, among other things, came under severe criticism for failing to train the instructors well, it being claimed they lacked commitment to their students. The learners themselves seemed to register for classes readily but they attended sporadically and eventually were certified without attaining literacy proficiency. It was common for persons to have received several literacy proficiency certificates without the corresponding literacy skills. Despite these shortcomings, NCLO demonstrated to the nation that people were willing to volunteer their time and that wide scale literacy proficiency was attainable if very complex.

In 1967 the government created a central coordinating unit which was attached to the Ministry of Education. Known as Directorate of Adult

Education and Literacy, it was designed to provide overall guidance; co-ordinate literacy efforts; collect statistics; through provincial education officers to conduct literacy programs; and establish standards of literacy proficiency. It was also charged with the preparation of the syllabi for literacy, numeracy, health clinics, and other basic information.

With the passage of time the number of organizations engaged in teaching literacy expanded significantly. By 1973 there were at least twenty different government, semi-government, private, and religious organizations engaged in the propagation of some kind of literacy skills. As shown in Table I these diverse organizations together enrolled just under one and a half million people over an eight year period. Even if half this number had been made permanent literates (which is doubtful) this clearly would be a significant achievement.

Some of these organizations taught literacy as an end in itself, others tried to relate these skills to wider objectives. For instance in the case of the armed forces and certain para-governmental and commercial organizations, literacy skills were considered as contributive to the productivity of the individual workers and hence to the organizations for which they worked.

Particular mention must be made of the work of Protestant missionary groups who have joined forces with a country-wide organization of Lutheran churches known as the Evangelical Church, Mekane Yesus. The groups together support an organization known as Yemissrach Dimits (YD). Established in 1962 the Literacy Campaign arm of Yemissrach Dimits with respect to its organizational structure, and the creation of learning materials and producing literate adults, one of the most successful agencies in the country. Evidently the skills and motivation that may be the prerequisites

Table I

Enrollment in Ethiopian Literacy Programs, 1964-71

Year	Male	Female	Total of Increase
1964	158,778	35,172	193,950
1965	107,660	14,747	122,407
1966	126,057	19,817	145,874
1967	129,527	23,630	153,157
1968	130,753	42,703	173,456
1969	183,535	45,332	228,867
1970	119,292	38,071	157,363
TOTAL	1,193,602	278,551	1,472,153

Source: R.O. Niehoff and B.D. Wilder, "Non-Formal Education in Ethiopia," p. 171.

for producing adult literacy skills are epitomized in the programs operated by this group.

As we will observe later, the literacy efforts in Ethiopia were beset by several formidable problems. One such problem, which cuts across all literacy endeavors is the language question. The language of instruction and all literacy programs is Amharic. Up to two-thirds of the population may speak or understand Amharic, but for the majority of them it is nonetheless the second language. This means therefore that in many instances the literacy programs must approach that language as a second language, as well as to develop literacy skills in it. Up until recent times, although non-Amharic speakers would obviously need comparatively more time to master the literacy skills than native speakers, it was thought that there was no special reason for any different approach. This has been changed since the 1974 revolution to the point where efforts are now being made to produce literacy materials in some of the other forty major languages, and to the extent this is tackled successfully it may agree well for the progress of literacy.

The instructional materials and methods used by the literacy organizations vary: The National Literacy Campaign Organization uses the traditional alphabetical approach where the complete alphabet is memorized before the student begins to assemble the letters into words and phrases. Other organizations use a modified Laubach approach taking advantage of the phonetic nature of the Amharic alphabet, and its logical structure and the Laubach type representations to teach the alphabet and the words simultaneously. At this point the student then moves rapidly into phrases and sentences.

Of major consequence has been that over time, there were increasing

signs that imparting literacy skills alone was not achieving its intended goals and that means had to be found to relate literacy skills to the daily activities of the subjects.

The Work Oriented Adult Literacy Approach has as its central objectives creating new literates and keeping them literate by relating the literacy skills to their day-to-day activities. This calls for the mastery of the basic skills of literacy by drawing illustrative materials, vocabularies, and concepts from the immediate environments of the learners. Under this approach it is assumed that a peasant living in the rural parts of a region will become literate and remain so if literacy is related to types of crops, cattle, seeds, plowing implements, planting and harvesting seasons, and the like. This seems logical. But there remains the difficulty of finding instructors who are qualified to teach literacy skills as well as farm oriented skills at the same time, a problem that is compounded by the fact that written materials hardly exist that are based on the daily activities of the scores of diverse farming communities that exist across the nation. This problem should have become slightly simplified among industrial workers most of whom are located in cities or large towns. But even here observations indicate that literacy skills learned were not related to the work performed, nor was there evidence to show that workers became more productive as a result of having gone through mastering literacy skills.

Still another large-scale literacy program was undertaken in 1968. In spite of negative experiences to the contrary, the Ethiopian government and UNESCO once again entered into an agreement for the latter to carry out a five year experiment during which various methods and materials were to be tested and a total of 128,000 people would be trained.

Consistent with the trend of the time, the underlying philosophy of this program was that literacy training programs should incorporate substantive content relevant to the day-to-day work experiences of participants. Further, the content should contribute to the improvement of the participants' lives, and the enhancement of their work. Baseline surveys were conducted during the initial phases of the program to determine the nature of the work-oriented content for the literacy materials to be used in the various project areas. Literacy materials based on this research were then produced.

The literacy classes were supervised in the field by both national and expatriate UNESCO experts who had the responsibility of a sub-province area. Literacy teachers were trained in the geographical areas in which they worked by the central staff of UNESCO project. Teachers were drawn from local extension agents, teacher's pools, and school learners. Each teacher was given fifteen days of training in teaching Amharic according to the "global method." The substantive aspects of the program were presented by the local extension agents who worked with the various development programs, such as with agricultural personnel, or as home economists working with local women, and so on. This approach made the program dependent on the availability of the extension programs already in existence in the area. By indirect implication this meant that it was easier for UNESCO to train a language teacher than to train an extension agent.

Classes were conducted in schools, homes, and factories. On occasion villages constructed small buildings for literacy training purposes. Agriculturally oriented programs attempted to make use of demonstration plots in conjunction with the literacy classes; in actuality this was not often workable since agricultural cycles did not always coincide with the literacy program's sequence of presentation. This problem did not hold for

industrial workers and women's programs.

The UNESCO program was divided into three stages. The first presented the skills of literacy and numeracy, the second emphasized the reading of books to increase and strengthen the vocabulary and reading skills acquired, and the third consisted of a follow-up approach which called for a teacher to visit students in the villages once a month and provide some kind of mobile library services.

Follow-up surveys indicated, however, that this program was beset by numerous additional problems including absenteeism, the elusiveness of relating learned skills with the actual world of work, student drop-out before completing even the initial stages, and a lack of candor on the part of project administrators in admitting the existence of problems and bringing remedial action to bear on time.

There is no data as to how many people became literate under this program. The original figure of 128,000 was later reduced to 78,000, and there is reason to believe that even this latter figure was very high. Considering that, as of the first part of 1972 (one year prior to the terminal date), only 1,685 had finished the first phase and only half of these had enrolled for the second phase, it is unlikely that the 78,000 participant rate was realized by 1973. Consequently, the over three and a half million dollars spent for this project was very high. It is difficult to justify the expenditure relative to the number of literates produced by the program and especially when this is compared with the cost benefit of other literacy programs in Ethiopia. The program's justification therefore must be in terms of the development of materials, methods, and as a demonstration.

In the meantime other means of spreading adult functional literacy

are being explored. The leftist military regime that took over the reign government following the 1974 revolution seems to be determined to lighten the burden of the rural people by introducing the means of education at a larger scale. Beginning in September 1975, over fifty thousand university and secondary school students together with their teachers were sent out throughout the country for a two year period to spread the gospel of the revolution, but specifically to teach people literacy, numeracy, health and civics. How many people were reached and to what effect has never been evaluated. The indications are that similar efforts will be made in the future.

We can conclude this paper by saying that in the absence of systematic, comprehensive, evaluative data of the literacy efforts, it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusion regarding the effectiveness of adult literacy programs. The conclusions drawn here therefore must be considered tentative. The available fragmentary data and personal observations seem in general to indicate that adult literacy efforts as practiced in Ethiopia are wasteful and meaningless for the majority of participants. This is supported by the high level of absenteeism, drop-out, and relapse to illiteracy. Nor is there evidence to support the assumption that literacy skills help the individual to live in better harmony with his environment or that the skills learned, including aspects of "functional literacy," can be applied in solving possible work-related problems. Some of the reasons for this include incompetent teaching, absence of appropriate learning materials, and ineffectual administration or organization.

On the other hand, there are evidences suggesting that literacy skills are learned in the context of greater affective commitment. If the affective factors are present in sufficient amount in the individual's repertoire

literacy skills are acquired and become functional. The affective components are usually associated with religious or political ideology. We find that adherents of certain religious organizations, Protestants for instance, who place emphasis on salvation through personal understanding, seem to be successful. Organizations like these usually also provide the appropriate reading materials as well as needed emotional support via periodical meetings (church attendance) and the like. Although it is not examined in this paper, commitment to pervasive political ideology seem also to enhance literacy efforts; Cuba, and the People's Republic of China offer such examples.

Ethiopian efforts in adult literacy so far cannot be justified in terms of the result realized. This may conceivably change under the new Marxist military government if it succeeds in selling its political ideology to the masses of the country.

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